

COMMENTARY: Season of growing pains comes to end (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. – The 2010-11 Iowa men's basketball season could be described much like a roller coaster. It had some ups. It had plenty of downs. For the most part, it was a bumpy ride.

That bumpy ride reached its end on Thursday at Consecro Fieldhouse, as the Hawkeyes were knocked out of the first round of the Big Ten Tournament by Michigan State, 66-61. The loss put Iowa's final overall record this season at 11-20.

Considering where the program was at this time a year ago (coming off an abysmal 10-22 campaign and finding itself searching for a new head coach), one could say strides have been made reaching 11-20.

To me, the biggest stride made came mentally. Talking to players inside the Iowa locker room after the game Thursday, the disappointment came with losing. Not with each other, not with the style of play or what not. Losing this game just simply frustrated a team that felt it had a good shot at beating the Spartans.

This is not at all to suggest that the team accepted losing in years past. The point I'm trying to make is that whatever frustration there may have been in years past didn't seem to be a motivator.

I don't know yet how good the Hawkeyes will actually be next season. That, actually, is just way too early to even discuss. A lot of things need to shake out still, not just with Iowa,

but across the entire Big Ten conference.

What I do know is this, though – the players who are coming back look motivated.

Junior guard Bryce Cartwright, after coming three rebounds and four assists shy of a triple-double (think about that for a second) made the comment about how he needed to take on the responsibility of leading this team. This comment came from a guy that arguably emerged as Iowa's best player this season and led the Hawkeyes on Thursday in the three key statistics in basketball – points, rebounds, and assists.

After enduring an entire season of growing pains, I could tell how hungry the players are to get back on the court next fall. It wasn't as though they just wanted this season over with. They just are ready to take that next step in the rebuilding process.

How different the Hawkeyes look come October remains to be seen, but one could argue momentum from this season can be carried over. After all, Iowa came into this game having beaten then-No. 6 Purdue in its home finale, and had a chance to tie Thursday's game with a 3-pointer in the final seconds against the Spartans.

My advice to fans would be this – let the pieces fall where they may. Eventually, you'll have something to be happy about, because I don't see the core of this team getting pushed around too much longer. How long it takes for the results to show in victories is undetermined, but the effort will remain. With that, I have no doubt.

The Hawkeyes took their beatings during the 2010-11 season. Now we're about to find out how much this team has learned from the ups and downs of this bumpy ride.